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AUTHOR Short, Jack T.
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ABSTRACT

Library trustees should be more perceptive and aware of their responsibilities. There appears to be a lack of interest in the cooperation necessary to maintain a national library trustee organization. This fact should justify the development of public relations programs for libraries and library boards. The American Library Trustee Association (ALTA) could be more effective; it could be instrumental in constructing programs such as development of effective information retrieval systems and a proposed national library card. With adequate funding, it should be possible to evolve the type of national library trustee organization that is needed. (DS)

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AN ADDRESS GIVEN TO
AMERICAN LIBRARY TRUSTEE ASSOCIATION
BY JACK SHORT
ON 6/29/75 IN SAN FRANCISCO

Studies and reports on the adequacy of library service in America reflect a wide range of opinion on how well library needs are being met. There does appear to be a consensus of thinking that in large measure we are failing to give adequate library service to the total population. There are pockets of excellence, but in the broad sweep of meeting total library needs, we have failed. The library in America is essentially an elitist institution.

It would be easy to point an accusing finger in a number of directions, but the more I have analyzed and evaluated the situation the more I find that the burden of guilt rests on the shoulders of library trustees.

To a large extent this guilt is not one of conscious abrogation of duty, but rather more a lack of awareness of the implications of library trusteeship. We have thousands of knowledgeable and talented library trustees in America, but at the same moment we have an equal number of trustees who are failing in their stewardship. The problem is intensified because for the most part, it is those who could most greatly benefit from participation in ALTA who do not, while the group assembled here represents those already concerned and dedicated.

For that reason, I am not going to dwell on the specifics of what is wrong with those trustees who are failing, but rather I shall sketch out a positive plan of action for a national trustee organization, which includes programs and policies that will enable us to reach into every library board in an enhancing and supportive manner.

As Jean Coleman has commented, "Only a very small percentage of trustees are interested in any level beyond that of their own boards." If that be so, then we must work with them at that level. We must design a structure and organization that relates to that situation. As Jean has so wisely observed, "at the national level we need support from all, but are content to have active participation from few."

What is it about the nature of trusteeship that creates such a dilemna? Let us explore for a moment the meaning of trusteeship. Because until the concept of what constitutes trusteeship is understood and internalized by the individual, the trustee role will remain reactive rather than affirmatively active. This type of change, to me, is critical and basic, as boards of trustees must NOT be rubber stamp, passive organizations.

Robert Greenleaf has expressed it well; "Trustees are persons in whom ultimate trust is placed and who stand outside the institution, apart from administration and with more detachment and objectivity than insiders can summon. The trustee role is to monitor closely the movement of an institution toward its goals, and to act both as critic and advocate, defender and court of last resort."

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One of the difficulties of exploring the term "trustee" is that each state, region and local community has rather freely bent and twisted its meaning to accomodate the local situation. This applies not only to library boards, but boards of education, hospital boards and business boards of directors.

We should not tolerate any diminution of the role of the library trustee. It is essential to institutional balance: the board of trustees balancing the administrative group. Some administrators will always strive to either eliminate a board of trustees or, more commonly, modify the role. Some library directors and library trustees have an ego problem when it comes to board - staff relationships. This is most apt to happen when trustees, lacking insight as to the meaning of their responsibilities, conceive their role as "better than" or in some way "superior to" that of the staff. We are all equals, with different roles and responsibilities.

Selma Kessler has observed, "It is incumbent upon the librarian to keep trustees informed about developments in the library world so that together the trustees and the librarian can apply this knowledge to their own patterns of service. If librarians have continually educated their trustees and kept them up to date on needs, programs, and innovations in the field, then the chances for cooperative decision making are increased. I have learned, to my chagrin, that some librarians take the opposite point of view. I have heard some say, 'the less the trustees know, the better.' Then one day a perceptive trustee comes along and starts to make inquiries - and then the sparks begin to fly!"

In addition, Alice Ihrig has observed that "librarians need to understand their obligation to urge trustees to be more active just as much as trustees need to recruit better trustees. Without advocacy for libraries at every level, the profession is in trouble - to say nothing of the public which still doesn't know what good library service can be." Alice also points out that "there is tremendous ignorance among librarians and trustees on the basic facts of government and politics. Both seem to feel that libraries can live in isolation from life. ALTA needs to keep harping on working with other levels of government."

If this be so, then our role as a national trustee organization must be to make library trustees more perceptive and aware.

And what library trustees? Lee Brawner expressed a concern recently that for the most part only one type of library, the public library, is represented at the national level. He asks; "All major library types, including school and academic, have their respective trustee 'type' bodies such as school boards, boards of higher education or regents. True, these bodies have responsibilities for more than just the libraries involved, but could then not select one of their members to take a special interest in library development?"

Along the same line, I feel that local library boards should be aware of the professional level of school libraries, and would be expressing their concern as responsible library trustees in urging local school boards to improve school libraries. A touchy area, but if you think of your trusteeship on libraries in a total sense, this certainly should be explored.

How do we encourage local boards to think along these lines? Martin Phelan has advocated that ALTA develop a sample policy guide. Concerns about school libraries could be a part of that guide.

Recently the National School Boards Association sponsored a survey conducted by the Gallup organization which tested public understanding of and attitude toward school boards. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed could not name anything their school board had done during the last year. Sixty-two percent did not know their school boards were responsible for public representation within the school system. I suspect findings would be similar concerning library boards.

This, I feel, mandates the development of effective public relations programs for libraries and library boards. It is important that funds be used for staff public relations talent as well as for outside public relations professionals. Along that same line I have long felt that it would be better in times of tight budgets to cut materials acquisition, and put more into promotion which would lead to better utilization of existing materials and services. This with the thought that as we improve library services, we should be able to secure increased funding.

Relating the public relations need to ALTA, I am encouraging the continued development of a strong and active public relations committee.

Just as there is an irrationality of human beings and their behavior patterns, the same is true for institutions. Where it is in an individual we can ignore irrational behavior - we can isolate - we can more easily modify. An institution, bu its very nature and size, does not lend itself readily to change and modification. But change we must, because what we do or don't do - in a total sense - has a great impact on the lives of millions of individuals. Too much of the public concern for the quality of society is still devoted to caring directly for individuals and not enough attention goes to the way institutions are structured. We always tend to limit our vision to our immediate community and personal situation, but a creative thrust on your part can translate not only an immediate reaction in your community, but might also trigger a nationwide pattern. If this be so, we cannot be as casual as we have been regarding a national library trustee organization.

This brings up the question: What should be the structure of ALTA?

Over one hundred trustees and librarians answered my request for their observations and insights on the most effective design for a national library trustee organization. My sincere thanks go to those of you who did write, because those letters did a lot for me in developing my thinking. They revealed that there is a hard core group of talented and perceptive library trustees who are disturbed and concerned about what is happening in America's libraries.

As a result, I suggest the following. The overall design of ALTA should be changed from an organization of many weak committees to one strong executive board with a task-oriented structure. Participation in committee work is often a charade resulting from the feeble rationale that everyone who belongs to a national organization should have a job. Committees should have well stated goals and objectives, and need have only enough individuals to fulfill those goals and objectives.

There must be more communication with the individual trustee; communication that relates to local needs and concerns. Information and data that will make every library trustee more aware of the implications of his or her trusteeship must be passed on.

We must be concerned with who becomes a trustee in America. As one individual wrote, "How do we communicate to mayors and council people the qualifications needed for library trustees? For instance, in our state mayors, by law, are ex-officio members of library boards. Yet in far too many cases, they do not even attend board meetings. They come alive at budget time, though."

This relates to what Ann Lane, President of the City of Los Angeles Board of Library Commissioners wrote me: "The issue that has perhaps the greatest importance to the Library Commission (trustees) here in Los Angeles is their relationship to city government and to the budget process. With the regularity of clockwork, some member of the City Council asks for a new study of the value of placing the city's independent departments under direct Mayor-Council control, and we rise again to defend our limited independence. I know this issue is of concern to many trustees, not all of whom agree on the need for such independence, but see themselves in an advisory-only capacity. I have had no experience in small towns, no experience in other cities, but I have had much experience as a member of an advisory committee, with no real responsibility or power. It does not work."

Sam Harshbarger, a well-known attorney in West Virginia, sent along an interesting letter. "The very most important element in the structure of a free public library is independent, adequate financing.

"This element is the best protection against effective censorship. (if there are no 'purse-string' holders, there are no 'tune-callers') It also allows trustees and staff to concentrate on how best to serve rather than on how-to-get-money-this-year. It would be a monumental project for ALTA to launch a nation-wide drive for independent public library financing. Each state which does not have it, would have different needs, certainly. But ALTA could promote, correlate and coordinate, and supply information useful to all.

"I've been studying the prospect of a state law dedicating certain tax receipts of the state or county to public financing in West Virginia. I have talked with several groups of trustees throughout the state, and have found that many of them who have been engaged in annual begging have never even considered the possibility of an alternative."

It seems to me that a small task-oriented group to trustees on the national level could study this and share its findings across the nation. A task-oriented Executive Board could move on this by calling on other trustees who have a national concern. In a sense this could be the training ground where we could identify individuals who would eventually serve on the executive board, which must be a working board.

I am also concerned about those talented library trustees who having served well in ALTA move on into the ALA structure. . . to such an extent that they no longer have thetime nor energy to serve the trustee interest. If ALTA were functioning strongly I would not be as concerned. But at this period when we are in the throes of perplexity and of searching for new directions, we need the continuing support of every trustee. Naturally there are values in having trustees represented on a number of ALA groupings, but to what extent should be evaluated.

And what about our ALA role? The dues increase for t[illegible] has had the very positive value of forcing ALTA members to exam[illegible]re closely the meaning of their ALTA membership, and it has been found [illegible]anting. What has ALTA really done for its members? Most library boards are willing to support a national organization in direct ratio to what it does for them. We can go into all the philosophical discussions on the importance of a national organization and its merits but support for most institutions finally comes down to, "what's in it for me?"

And our answer can be "a great deal." I am willing to work within the ALA structure, <u>if</u> there can be accomodation and understanding of the unique situation that applies to library trustees. If this fails, I will be the first to urge the development of a National Library Boards Association, including if you will, the urban, suburban and rural groupings.

However, for the moment we are ALTA and let us strengthen that and again let me explore the question of structure. Don Cramer revealed a lot of thought about this in a letter he wrote to me. "I believe that the present ALTA organization is ineffective, and its present organization positively prevents the organization from accomplishing much. For example, the Action Development Committee acts as a buffer which may prevent committee recommendations from getting to the Board, and which deprives the Board of its real decision-making power by prescreening out ideas which it should be entitled to consider."

His letter in total appears to support my position of a more active executive board following a more task-oriented approach with a number of limited committees.

One of the most vital committees is the Conference Program Committee. It seems to me that if we think of library trustees and the educational need, the two most useful techniques of communication for a national organization are individual mailings and the annual national conference. Personally, I would like to see this meeting include more of substance for the trustee. As much as I enjoy the social events, if I travel two thousand miles I want a program of depth and educational content. Now I'm not going to be too critical of the social events, in that perhaps one of the greatest values of any conference is the one-to-one discussions you can have with fellow trustees in dinner meetings such as these. At the same time, formal programming is important, and we should increase the number of trustee concerns covered at each conference. It is a difficult task, in that every conference has old and new trustees, and a balance is hard to achieve. In any event, to me the Conference Program Committee must have constant evaluation and support.

But, what about concerns which arise between the national conference and the individual mailings?

For instance, positions on national library issues and concerns. Recently President Ford indicated that he would nominate to the position of Librarian of Congress an individual who, according to one newspaper account, is a former avowed Communist, has been accused by a well-known newspaper columnist of using $85,000 in taxpayers' facilities to write his Pulitzer prize winning book, is on record as being opposed to affirmative action for women on college campuses, and is a non-librarian. With other talent available for this key position in librarianship, does ALTA maintain a passive position, or does it attempt to secure a position of support or non-support from its membership?

Do we question cities like Tucson, Arizona where library board members tend to be upper middle class Anglos? With the recent emphasis on involving minorities the picture has somewhat changed, but still there has never been a library trustee from the southside of town.

Should we be concerned when the U.S. Commissioner of Education Terrell H. Bell and HEW Secretary Caspar Weinberger sign announcements referring to the "Division of Library Programs," despite the fact that Public Law 93-380 mandates the creation of an "Office of Libraries and Learning Resources," a unit higher in the bureaucracy than a division of HEW.

At the moment we have as executive director of the National Library Commission an individual whose major vocational orientation has been that of state librarian. I fear he would tend to see the state as the pivotal point for library service. Fear, because although we have some excellent state librarians, many are weak individuals, incapable of giving the dynamic leadership that would be needed if the state library became the focal point of future federal funding and support. Should trustees of local libraries be concerned?

How should library trustees handle the "knowledge explosion" which to them is not just an abstraction but a troublesome reality? The world's output output of new books is around 1000 titles per day. The United States Government publishes over 100,000 reports per year, plus over 450,000 articles, books and papers. The world generates new scientific and technical information at the rate of about six million pages per year. This output creates problems which must be met by library trustees.

Word processing should also be a concern of ALTA both in terms of how library administrators relate to it and also in the way it is approached as regards information retrieval. Some believe the paperless office is not far off. Libraries should take the leadership role in utilizing new technology in word processing. It could mean a more effective use of taxpayers dollars.

As important as the Freedom To Read Foundation is, that same quantity of time and money spent on the more positive theme of increasing the number of books being read, rather than on the problem of censorship, would have a greater impact on a larger number of people. Unfortunately, those that like causes will respond more easily to the emotionally filled censorship issues, for how many are attracted by the more subtle point that millions of Americans are not reading anything?

College costs are not only going up, they are going up faster than most other things. This basic fact about higher education, bothersome but tolerable in the expansionary times of the past, is now causing increasing concern in the academic world. A result is growing attention to that most uncomfortable of words to academic ears - "productivity" - and a growing conviction among some educators that the ultimate result must be some major changes in the structure of the teaching-learning process. This is loaded with implications for public libraries as an institution of continuing education.

Is a national library card a feasible project? In the same way as you have national credit cards for consumer convenience, so could a national library card enhance library service for every individual. What would be the role of ALTA in its development and promotion?

Earlier I made reference to the Gallup survey on national school boards. Frankly, I am not as concerned with the public image of library trustees as I am of how library trustees view themselves. An awareness by the trustee of his role and function is step one. ... the public image will follow. As the trustee responds to some of the issues indicated above, public awareness will be enhanced. As a national trustee organization, we should discuss these items and perhaps come to different conclusions, but always disagreeing with vigor and grace. Intelligent individuals can make constructive accomodations in position.

Along with a grasp of issues beyond the local library, trustees must think through their attitudes regarding staff. Why must talented young professionals play musical chairs before they are given positions of great responsibility? Let's give them large quantum jumps of authority and responsibility. And let's have the fortitude to dismiss library directors who are failing to meet the needs of the community. Let us not sacrifice the institution for the individual. Obviously the change is made with sensitivity and understanding - but the change is made. But only a knowledgeable board can make the change, and that is where the national trustee organization can help that board's members gain the necessary insights as to what constitutes excellent library service. If you haven't experienced what constitutes a good library, how can you evaluate it? ALTA fills this gap of information for many.

Salaries, too, must be increased, while the other side of that coin is to demand in turn professional competency. We are past the day when an individual who decided to become a librarian had to take a vow of genteel poverty. Unfortunately, that concept is not quite dead. Examine if you will the "humor pages" of "American Libraries" - usually the last few pages. For example, the June issue; Wanted: Children's librarian. MLS ALA accredited school. Library and/or teaching experience. Salary $173.00 a week.

What has ALTA done in terms of salary schedules? What has ALTA done in terms of awareness of increasing unionization? How well do trustees know their budgets? What are we doing as a national organization to train them?

ALTA, like many national organizations, is suffering from institutional drift. To revitalize the organization we need "new blood" less than we need to look at ourself in a new way. A perspective that will allow us to make a number of fundamental moves in a management sense - that will create a new vitality.

Institutional drift can occur as a result of two major conditions; (one) the only impetus is that generated from past periods and the institution reacts like a clock winding down, and (two) when it has been artificially strengthened or supported by a larger institution (in our case ALA) and that support is removed or modified.

Institutional drift can be halted or restrained by a number of thrusts. One such thrust is that of introspection; a process that must be objective and analytical, but not critical or judgmental. This can be done by a strong executive board. It is possible that this introspection will lead us to conclusions that will require difficult, disagreeable decisions.

The intellectual exploration that will be required to halt institutional drift in ALTA should not constitute a major problem for us, in that national organizations by their very nature reflect large amounts of intellectual talent from across the country. The weakness is more in the communications structure. Other than the limited days here at this conference and again at mid-winter, we simply do not have the time frame to accomplish that which we perceive needs to be done.

Perhaps this proves the need for a small, tight core group of the executive committee to assume a more aggressive and perhaps autocratic role for a year or two. Along with this, additional funding would be needed to cover travel and other expenses. Perhaps here we would have to rearrange our present budget by taking a bit from the budgets of the regional vice-presidents.

As I have indicated, the nature of a national organization is such that perceptions are fragmented, and it is difficult to grasp the total picture. Or expressed another way, how can we pull together the myriad factors that constitute ALTA and put them into a form that is integrated and unified?

As your president-elect this past year, I made an intensive effort to find a formula, to evolve a structure, to devise a form for this national library trustee organization through which it would achieve its goals. However, because of its limited budget, no conceivable structure appeared adequate. The key problem appears to be that we are nickel-diming the national organization, and that type of funding precludes a meaningful national organization by its very nature.

For instance, a half-time executive secretary cannot possibly fill the need, and creates a charade by suggesting that something of substance exists in terms of institutional structure.

I believe that somewhere there exists a foundation that will give us seed money for a two year period to help us evolve the type of national library trustee organization that is needed. Each year the libraries in America spend millions of dollars. More effective library trustees will lead to a better utilization of those dollars. This would be the kind of foundation grant that would have an effect for generations. Perhaps there is an individual who could provide the necessary funding. Some place in America - some library user or board member - could provide needed funds. We must ask. You must explore the possibility in your city and state.

Until that kind of seed money becomes available, however, we must utilize our available resources in a manner that will provide the maximum possible return. This holds true not only for ALTA, but for local library boards as well. It is too easy to say, "if only we had more funds." What have we done in ALTA to make library boards aware of their responsibility on budgets, and to train them for making do with what they have? I have the uncomfortable feeling that much money is being lost in duplicated services and materials. It is easy for funds to be wastefully diffused and dissipated. Often this occurs because staff operate on a reflexive, habitual level. Trained and talented library trustees aware of this problem can create change.

The question of our limited funds and what we can do with them constitutes a major problem. Limited funding leads easily to the inception of abortive, disconnected projects, none of which receives sufficient resources to lead to successful results. Because of this trap, I will be requesting a deeper analysis of projects and a limiting of our resources to some well-identified areas, at our executive board meeting. I will also be suggesting that we should at least consider placing a focus on one particular region and seeing what adequate financing could do, rather than continuing to distribute limited funds everywhere and accomplishing nothing.

It is my hope that this speech will create a sense of purpose and cohesion even before the new objectives are established. It is my aim to optimize the present. Even if we had unlimited funding, the nature of a national organization should be one of flux, always dynamic, never static. As your president I will attempt to destroy that rigidity that comes from the power of custom and tradition.

During the coming year I will be asking you to help me clarify issues, define alternatives, collect data, and conduct analyses; and don't wait for me to ask. In no way can I identify and reach out to the 60,000 library trustees in America individually. Drop me a note - give me a call - pull me off into a corner and share with me your thinking. Frankly, in terms of time management, the letter or note is best, but believe me - in any form, your thinking is needed. The strength of America's libraries lies in the individual hands of thousands of trustees. Until every library trustee sees and grasps the implication of his or her trusteeship, no library trustee should rest comfortably. It is not enough to say "everything is fine in my town." Library service is for each and every American, and if a single person is deprived of it - then I hold you and me responsible.